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ABSTRACT

This study builds on research that identified empirical evidence indicating that at least one language for special purposes (LSP) domain and one non-LSP domain are in fact associated with some differential results in the consequent interlanguage (IL) structure of non-native users of English. The current study focuses on the methodological problems in establishing an "episode" in which English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners use the internally bound IL contexts that they have developed. Video- and audio-taped sessions of language interaction between a native-Chinese-speaking graduate student teaching mathematics and his students were used as primary data. Secondary data consisted of commentary on these interactions by the students in his class (coparticipants) and by subject-specialist informants. It is maintained that the student-informant insights come out of the internally-created discourse domains that are the initiators of second language acquisition. (DJD)

The Problem of Comparing Episodes in Discourse Domains in Interlanguage Studies

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THE PROBLEM OF COMPARING EPISODES IN DISCOURSE DOMAINS IN INTERLANGUAGE STUDIES*

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We have argued (Selinker, 1980; Selinker and Douglas, 1985) for a discourse domain (DD) view of interlanguage (IL), where it is at least possible that some large set of IL forms are related to the attemped expression of meaning with regard to such contextual factors as importance to the learner, subject matter, audience, and so on. In the 1985 paper, we present empirical evidence that at least one language for specific purpose (LSP) domain and one non-LSP domain are in fact associated with some differential results in the consequent IL structure and in the way non-native (NN) users of English actually structure information in IL discourse. We have thus proposed a view of Il development, where the learner, wrestling with context as language user, first develops DDs that are important and/or necessary for him/her to talk and/or write about. In this paper, we are interested in continuing the process of creating an empirical methodology for studying this view of how learners develop internally-bounded contexts in IL. Here we report on methodological problems in establishing an "episode" - the unit of comparative analysis in our approach. We discuss comparative criteria and show structural differences within comparative episodes across domains.

In Selinker and Douglas (1985) we have presented discussions of relevant literature, which we will not repeat here. We are ready to be corrected here, but the only reference we have been able to find that discusses episodes in a similar way to that which we intend is Levinson (1979). Levinson begins the discussion by introducing his notion of activity type:

> I want to introduce as a term of art the notion of an 'activity type'...In particular I take the notion of an activity type to refer to a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with constraints on participants, setting and so on, but above all, on the kinds of allowable contributions...The category is fuzzy because...it is not clear whether it includes a chat (probably) or the single telling of a joke (probably not)...
>
> Levinson 1979:367-368
> (emphasis in original)

Levinson goes on to describe characteristics of various "activities". Where the notion begins to link up with our work is when Levinson faces the problem of subdividing an activity:

> Elements of the structure of an activity include its subdivision into a number of sub-parts or episodes as

> we may call them (for example, a seminar usually involves first a presentation, followed by a discussion, while a court case is divided into a statement of the case, cross-examinations, the passing of sentence, etc.)... In general wherever possible I would like to view these structural elements as rationally and functionally adapted to the point or goal of the activity in question, that is the function or functions that members of the society see the activity as having.
>
> Levinson 1979:369
> (emphasis in original)

Although there are differences between our approach and that of Levinson in that his appears to be somewhat more external to the language user (for example, "social episodes" p. 393) than we believe fits the creator of an IL, there is a clear link in that what Levinson refers to as "goal" of the activity appears to us often to relate to the rhetorical and conversational principles that we use to compare episodes. Nevertheless, his appeal to Wittgenstein's (1945) notion of "language games," towards the end of his paper, fits in closely with the prespective we are attempting to develop. In Selinker and Douglas (1985), the notion of language games is mentioned in connection with the study of context in IL learning, and Levinson amplifies for us this connection:

> ...there seems to be healthy tendency towards the rational construction of language games as organizations adapted to achieving certain goals - the main purpose of the activity in question. A very good idea of the kind of language usage likely to be found within a given activity can thus be predicted simply by knowing what the main function of the activity is seen to be by participants.
>
> Levinson 1979:394

Levinson, however, does not describe in any detail the methodological problems of empirically establishing episodes within activity types, or, from our perspective, discourse domains. Our goal in this paper is to continue the process of developing an empirical methodology for establishing an "episode" - the unit of comparative analysis in our approach - reflecting back, hopefully, to our underlying purpose of understanding the role of context in IL learning (Selinker and Douglas, 1985).

DISCOURSE DOMAINS

We now present our current best-shot definition of discourse domains:

> A discourse domain is personally and internally constructed "slice" of one's life that has importance and over which the learner exercises content-control. Importance is

empirically shown by the fact that in interaction one repeatedly talks (or writes) about the area in question. Discourse domains are primarily dynamic and changing, and may become permanent parts of a learner's cognitive system. Some domains may be created temporarily for particular important purposes. The concept also has a discontinuous aspect to it in that a domain can be taken up, dropped, left dormant and revived. Such domains are usually thus not fixed for life but may change with one's life experience - and often do.

The criteria for recognizing a discourse domain are thus importance to the learner, interactional salience, discontinuousness, control of content (in that the learner knows about the topic, but not necessarily the language to express it), and the fact that such domains are highly personal. An important additional feature of some domains is temporariness. Take, for example, the discourse domain "talking about one's own research." We see this domain at work with graduate student colleagues working on doctoral dissertaions. Such colleagues have reported feelings such as "these days I can only talk about my own research - I can't talk about anyone else's" and "before going on a job interview, I have to read up on other people's work now in order to be able to talk about it in case someone brings it up." We resonably expect a temporary aspect to the strength of this domain.

We hypothesize, for example, that during the taking of a language test (cf. Douglas and Selinker 1985 for more details), the test taker, in order to render the test or test item intelligible, (a) may engage an already existing domain, whether initially temporary or fossilized, (b) *may* contextualize without domain creation, or (c) may struggle for contextualization, trying out various hypotheses and adjustments in an attempt to "make sense" of the test text. We further hypothesize that these choices are ordered and that which option is cognitively chosen depends upon whether the learner <u>controls</u> factors such as topic or its initiation in the interaction.

Though it is important to emphasize that learners do create very personal domains that are not necessarily shared by other individuals, one gains generalizability by conceiving of "prototypical" discourse domains: individuals often create similar domains such as "life story" domains, "talk about work" domains, "defending one's culture" domains, etc. It is the notion of prototypical domains and texts that are typical of a domain that we feel provides a link with the creation of intelligibility in L2 performance, and also with our view that the closer the language task is to prototypical IL contexts, the greater the likelihood that the learner's IL competence will be engaged and measured.

Beaugrande (1984) adds some empirical substance to our perspective when he points out that:

> ...speech in behalf of views one doesn't believe in has a noticeably higher proportion of errors.
>
> Beaugrand 1984:28

Here, he refers to empirical work by Mehrabian (1974). It is important to note that Beaugrande and Mehrabian are working in native-speaker (NS) contexts. Though NSs, in our view, clearly create discourse domains, it should be noted here that there may be important distinctions between NS and NNS discourse domains. However, speculation on this point is beyond the scope of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

In general, our approach combines grounded ethnography in ethnomethodology (Frankel and Beckman 1982) with the subject-specialist informant procedure (Selinker 1979) in LSP studies. In this methodology, which we describe in detail elsewhere (Selinker and Douglas 1985), we employ video- and audio-tape technology to record 1) language interactions between subjects and their coparticipants, and 2) commentary on the interactions provided by the coparticipants and by subject-specialist informants. The first kind of data we term "primary data," and the second we term "secondary data." In the commentary or review session, the informant reviews the video data with the instruction to stop the tape where he/she sees or hears something "interesting, unusual, different or problematic." The commentary provided in this secondary data can guide the analysis of the interaction in the primary data in quite profound ways by providing insights not accessible to the researchers through analyst-based techniques alone. Importantly, the student-informant insights, we claim, come out of the internally-created discourse domains which, we claim further, are the initiators of second-language acquisition.

PROCEDURE

Subjects: The subjects studied for this paper were a group of foreign teaching assistants in various technical subjects at Wayne State University. They were enrolled in an LSP course for foreign teaching assistants who had failed a test of spoken English proficiency required by the University. The course involved peer teaching, video-taping of student lectures, and self-critique. During the term when the data reported on were collected the instructor in the course was one of the present researchers. In addition to the video lecture data, recordings were made of the class participants engaged in conversational interaction in a number of contexts. The subject that we choose to report on here is Chinese, a Ph.D. student in mathematics, in his mid twenties. He clearly has pronunciation and fluency problems in spoken English, and was referred back to the course for a second semester by his department. At the time of the study, he had been in the United States for approximately two years and was teaching an introductory mathematics class.

Data: For the subject we report on here, we have the following video and audio recorded data. 1) a 15-minute lecture on a mathematics problem, presented in the class for foreign teaching assistants, 2) a 15-minute lecture on the topic of Chinese music, also in the class, 3) a group conversation with other Chinese teaching assistants and one of the investigators on the topic of Chinese food; 4) a dialogue interview with one of the investigators on the topic of the subject's life story; 5) audio data from the subject's review of the video data. In this paper we present episodes from 1) and 4), with commentary from 5).

RESULTS

Episode pair 1, part 1: This episode comes from the lecture on a mathematics problem, where the subject is discussing the following problem:

> A boy will be twice as old as his sister three years from now. Three years ago, he was four times as old as his sister. How old is each one now?

The student-informant was referring to pictures of the boy and girl he had drawn on the blackboard to illustrate the problem:

EPISODE PAIR 1 PART 1: TECHNICAL DOMAIN

> now we have...another information - the boy will be twice as old as his sister three years from now - so...three years...from now...uh here's boy...grown up...here's girl...she will be grown up...uh three years from now the girl will be three years older than...now - so...she will be three - X plus three years old - uh at that time the boy...will be twice as old as his sister so...it will be...she will be...he oh he will be two times X plus three twice as old as his sister [A] uh should be two times X plus three years old

SECONDARY DATA: STUDENT INFORMANT COMMENTARY [A]

Student: is that - is it correct - it is?

Researcher: mm hmm - where lemme go back

Student: if I said it is eh will be

Researcher: y' mean where you were talking about the formula?

Student: no - I was uh talk about the boy - I said it will be and I found out the boy cannot use it...can I say it will be...sometimes

Researcher: yeah if y' say

Student: grammar is - was

bad but

Researcher: yeah - y' c'n say it will be but if you - if you say that people will think you're talking about the formula the formula will be two times X plus three=

Student: oh

Researcher: =if y' say he will be they know you're talking about the boy so you can say either one but they mean different things

In the primary data, the bracketed [A] refers to the point where the student informant stops the video tape and provides commentary on the episode. One of his concerns is represented in the secondary data above, that of correct pronoun use, which the researcher does not at first understand. In line 7 of Figure 2, the learner says, "...it will be...she will be...he oh he will be two times X plus three twice as old as his sister". In the review session, the learner says, "Is that - is it correct - it is?" The researcher then says "y'mean where you were talking about the formula ?", indicating (and we have verified this) that he is unclear as to what the learner is referring to in the phrase "is it correct?" The learner says, "No - I was uh talk about the boy..." indicating he was using the phrase "is it correct?" to mean "is the use of the pronoun <u>it</u> correct here?", and idiosyncratic IL interpretation, <u>not</u> the normal target language (TL) interpretation of the English phrase "is it correct?". The researcher then begins to establish a common domain framework (what we think ordinary cooperative conversation is largely about) where they are both talking about the domain that the learner names "sometimes...grammar...is - was bad...", something that our secondary data clearly shows is quite important to him. The interlocutor then gives the learner a choice: he could have said "it" if he were referring to the formula or "he" if he were referring to the boy. Notice that here in terms of <u>validity</u> of gaining access to the learner's domains and domain structures, in the secondary data, we have gotten the learner to name the domain of concern to him: "sometimes...grammar is - was bad...". We have other examples in our data of learners doing this in review sessions (see e.g. Selinker and Douglas 1985). This commentary on his difficulties with English pronouns gave us the clue to look at pronoun use in a rhetorically similar episode in a different domain. The learner's overall rhetorical structure of the information in the lecture, which we cannot reproduce here owing to space considerations, is one of "concentricity." That is, he states the mathematical problem, which begs for solution, moves to the logic of the problem, using visual aids, moves to setting up an equation, and then moves back to the problem statement, plugging in the solution. These moves are signalled by 1) his use of the right and left sides of the blackboard, and 2) his use of the word "now", as appears in the beginning of the transcript above. We know from trying this mathematical problem out on colleagues

that his concentric rhetorical organization of it is not a necessary one, there are other ways of handling this information. Episode pair 1, part 2: This episode pair part occurs in the interview with one of the researchers concerning the subject's life story. The interviewer has just asked the subject about his siblings:

EPISODE PAIR 1 PART 2: LIFE STORY DOMAIN

Researcher: have you got brothers and sisters?

Student: yeah - is a sister - she lives in...in...Peking - Peking - my my younger brother now is in university - pretty good university in China - he studies com... computer science - studies computer science

Researcher: uh huh computer science

Student: and my sister from - she graduated from a university in Pek·ng...her major...her major...was ah management now she is the uh coal industry...coal=

Researcher: uh huh

Student: =industry (magistrate?)

Researcher: mm hmm oh? so she's older than you

Student: yeah she's older than me...two years [B]

SECONDARY DATA: STUDENT INFORMANT COMMENTARY [B]

Student: [laugh]

Researcher: now you didn't make any mistakes there

Student: no...I was thinking about it

Researcher: thinking about it?

Student: yeah...I know it's a problem...in China we don't talk about woman very much - so in English I have to think about he and she

In the primary data, the bracketed [B] indicates the point in the text where the student informant stops the tape and makes his comments. In this life story domain, the learner's rhetorical organization of information is also one of concentricity. He begins by discussing people that are close to him - his parents - then moves to a discussion of people further from him - his teachers - moves to a process/event description of

education, to a place description of his school, then to a comparison of education systems, and finally back to his own biography. This rhetorical structure is repeated several times throughout the interview.

It is interesting to us that the subject's pronoun use differs by domain, in that in the technical domain, his use of the personal pronoun was a problem for him, while in the life story domain it was not. Later in this paper we discuss some of the possible implications of this data, but here it is important to note the methodological principle of using the secondary data to provide clues to analyzing the primary data comparatively.

METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Here we wish to report to colleagues that the hardest part of working out the domain theory in IL studies has been creating a methodology to investigate and develop the theory. This process has been heuristic in that we have moved back and forth between theory and method, the two aspects of our work influencing each other. We now wish to suggest some methodological principles based on our experience. We focus on the use of secondary data to provide clues for the isolation and analysis of episodes in the primary data.

First, in review sessions, try to elicit from coparticipant reviewers, whether learner or native speaker, information on transition points, or changes in activity and information on segments which were problematic, interesting or unusual for the participant. Elicit a characterization of these segments in terms of what the goal or intention of the participant was, as well as what problems in communication or the expression of information there might have been. If possible, try to discover what the participant presupposed about the situation or the audience, why the participant hesitated where he/she did, why repairs were initiated if they were, why the participant was silent at a particular point, etc.

The analyst must balance reliance on the participant reviewer's sensitivities to the "problematic, interesting or unusual" with the need to discover exactly what to compare and what is comparable across domains. When is intervention and prompting a reasonable analytic procedure? We feel that the analyst should intervene in the review process when there are clear signals in the primary data that beg for discussion. For example, in the data presented here above, the researcher prompted the student informant in the second review session: "now you didn't make any mistakes there," with the informant acknowledging the point and providing language transfer and/or native cultural information that could be further investigated. Signals that can provide clues are well-known - gesture, movement, stress and intonation, facial movements etc. Useful information about the relationship of the rhetorical organization of IL information structure and the participant's view of the audience can be gained here as well. For example, in the data presented above on the mathematics lecture, the subject "packaged" the problem in a certain way (cf. Sacks, 1963, on "recipient design"), related to the audience he was presupposing.

Second, we have found that various types of expert reviewers are able to provide different sorts of information, different approaches and in general, different clues for the researchers to use in approaching the primary data. Some reviewers focus on gesture, others on the structuring of information, others on the technical subject matter, and still others on grammatical structure. The important point to be made here, however, is that no matter what interesting perspectives these expert reviewers and colleagues might provide for the analysis, the overriding methodological concern is the setting up of a comparative framework for the analysis of pairs or even groups of episodes across domains for microanalysis, which is our perspective and not necessarily that of our expert informants.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

In general, we propose a qualitative analysis as primary, with quantification entering as background at key points. Ellis (1985) argues this point in detail. Ellis notes that in his data, control or non-control of topics is an important factor in the developing IL. We see this variable at work in our data: the student informant, in the life story domain, experienced a number of difficulties with vocabulary that just did not come up in the technical domain. Furthermore, when viewing the video, the researchers had no real clues that vocabulary was giving him trouble — it was only brought out in the participant review session. For example, in the primary data, the subject said that his school was only a hundred meters from his home. He pointed out in the review session that he was unsure of how to express the notion of "home" since he and his family did not live in a "house" nor yet an "apartment" but only a "part" of an apartment. Again, in reviewing his discussion of the role of a school teacher in the primary data, the subject noted that he had had a very hard time with expressing the role. He had wanted to make the point that the relationship of the teacher to the pupils was like that of parent to child, but when he says it in English it is not satisfactory because "the relationship between parents and children is different in the United States than it is in China...children don't take care of their parents here..." Our point is that even in the domain of his life story, which he controls, the learner finds himself at times in situations which he does not control and where he is "at the edge of his capability" (Selinker and Douglas 1985) and his attention "diverted to new intellectual subject matter" (Selinker 1972). We would claim that it is precisely at such points that we can see IL learning taking place, and perhaps see syntax development taking place (Hatch 1983), but we would need domain-specific longitudinal studies to be sure, augmented by the study of domain transfer.

Another point that we wish to make about the rhetorical structuring of information in episodes involves the concept of linearity. In the technical, mathematics domain, the subject structured the information in a linear, logical, spare manner, which was nevertheless concentric, as we have described. In a precise sense, he did not choose to provide a narrative for

explaining the mathematical information, which he could have done. Some of the information in the life story domain, however, is structured in quite a different way, using narrative style. The following example will illustrate the point:

EPISODE PAIR 2 PART 2: LIFE STORY DOMAIN

Researcher: lemme talk to you for just a minute about something different - have you ever felt at any time in your life that your life was in danger...that you might be killed...that you might be injured or something like that...have you ever had that experience?

Student: yeah

Researcher: can you tell me about it

Student: uh...in the two years for example when I as in in uh the countryside and all the...at that time the...the young boys they they they are forced to go into the countryside...they are unhappy so they they they did they did something awful - like like the people are unemployed on umemployment here (something) like that and so they did very bad things - for example I - I - I - I didn't play with them so they they don't...didn't like me - they didn't like me...when I read my book in my apartment - so called apartment [laugh] then the there was a big. big rock flying [laugh] broken the window and flying in the hou... in the in the in the in the room

Part one of episode pair two, a significant portion of the technical lecture, is not presented since it would be too long to reproduce here. Though we would need expert advice on this point, we wish to suggest that the rhetorical structure represented by the episode above is quite non-linear, and is perhaps reflective of native language rhetorical transfer. The interviewer/coparticipant, during the interview, at the point where the subject said a) "...they didn't like me..." and b) "when I read my book in my apartment...", assumed that the rhetorical link was between a) and b), and was thrown off by the fact that the subject intended to link b) with c), the throwing of a rock through his window. The interviewer thus anticipated a causative structure when there was none. No such interpretive or anticipation problems occurred within the linear structure of the mathematics lecture.

As a side-product, this paper notes the question of replication within the domain theory. Replication has been traditionally difficult to perform in SLA studies owing to the difficulty in ensuring sameness of variables from one study to another. However, the attempts at comparison seem to have the advantageous effect of achieving greater specificity in defining SLA data sets. We are able to link our work up with the European Science Foundation project (Perdue, 1984) where global comparison

proves difficult but large comparative "local data sets" are indeed possible. The link we see involves the criteria for comparison, that of rhetorical and conversational structure. But we are left with serious questions. We believe that speakers create a context during verbal interaction and that this affects IL and fossilization. What we need to be able to work on concerning replication is the comparison of segments within a particular framework in comparative ways that make sense. We have to wonder if a universal rhetoric makes sense for IL, e.g. learners providing place descriptions vs. place descriptions that occur only within a particular context. In this data we find the rhetorical notions "concentricity" and "linearity" useful in setting up rhetorical comparison within the domain theory and wonder how far this methodological perspective would go. We hope colleagues will continue work on this problem.

Finally, given this additional data, we note the prediction (Selinker, 1980; Selinker and Douglas, 1985) that IL and LSP concerns are united in the following non-trivial way: that the important SLA processes such as language transfer, fossilization, and backsliding, as well as various avoidance, communication and learning strategies, do not occur globally across ILs but rather within discourse domains. We see differences across domains which we find in our research as continuing evidence of the plausibility of our position.

NOTE

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